



August 2006

# The Franciscan Legionnaire

Newsletter of the Friars Legion of St. Peter's Church in the Loop  
110 W. Madison St., Chicago, IL 60602 ❖ E-mail: FriarsLegion@aol.com  
Phone: 312-372-5111, Ext. 338 ❖ Web Site: www.stpetersloop.org

## HOW DO WE BELIEVE IN GOD?

John Henry Newman had a long life in the service of the Church, first as an Anglican and then as a Roman Catholic, and he seems to have spent most of it with a pen in his hand. He wrote sermons, histories, essays and tracts, novels, biography and autobiography, poetry, hymns, and theological works. He also kept a diary all his life, and wrote over 20,000 letters that have survived. In all this writing over all those years, there was one subject he kept returning to, one topic that intrigued him early on and that proved to be his life's interest – the justification of belief. Is religious faith reasonable? Are believers acting irrationally when they give their assent to religious doctrines that cannot be scientifically proven or logically deduced? How can religious faith be defended against the charge that it is a weakness of the mind, a crutch and a prop for those who cannot or will not live by reason and the demonstrations of reason?

Newman began serious work on this in some of his University Sermons, delivered at Oxford throughout the 1830's and 1840's, when he was an Anglican clergyman. In the 1860's, now a Roman Catholic, he returned to it again, intending to give it a book-length treatment. It did not come easily. He worked at it off and on for several years, writing much but not satisfied that he had even made a good beginning. While on a vacation in Switzerland in 1866 he had an insight that resolved his uncertainty about how to approach and organize the material, but it still took him another four years full of writing and rewriting to produce *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*. The title is richly suggestive. A

grammar book describes and analyzes the rules of a language. No one ever learned to speak a language just by reading a grammar book, nor do we need the help of a grammar book to speak a language that we know. But if we want to see how a language is put together and how it does what it does, then a grammar can be most helpful. Newman calls his book an *essay*, that is, an attempt. He is not trying to help people to make an act of belief – that would have required a title like *An Essay in Aid of Assent* – but is trying to help the reader to understand the hows and the whys of belief, the mechanism of faith, the ordinary rules by which it operates and is accomplished, in a word, faith's grammar.

The book reads in large part like a treatise on logic, so it is both difficult to get through and quite impossible to summarize in a short piece like this. In this brief space, however, it is possible to focus on what Newman has to say about how belief in God actually works in and on the mind, and why it does so in just this way.

Newman points out that there are two kinds of propositions, which are understood by the mind in quite different ways. A notional proposition is a statement about a class or group or kind of thing. It is general and abstract, and tends to make use of common nouns. "All men die" is a notional proposition. It speaks a truth about all human beings, and so is quite general, even universal. Its apprehension or understanding by our mind is likewise notional; we assent to it as a general truth, a right idea, and as such it is abstract and a bit removed from us. It is true

and it is an important truth, but it does not hit us where we live. We believe it to be a true statement about all humans, and that includes us, but it does not touch us in a very immediate way.

Real propositions, in contrast, are statements about specific things. Individual descriptions or names are used, and these are about real things, not notions or classes or abstractions. They have a much different feel to them, one which is more immediate, perhaps even central. “My wife will die. My son will die. My mother will die. I will die.” Each one of these is as true as “All men will die,” but they feel different. These do hit us where we live, even if the specific person mentioned is in good health, reasonably young, and so (we hope) a good many years removed from his or her death. Our understanding of this kind of proposition is a real understanding, a real apprehension. We deal here not with a class or a generality or a notion, but a real, specific, concrete individual. This involves not just our capacity for abstract reasoning, but our imagination. These propositions are real because the people are real, and they are really present to us by their images in our minds. Even when my son is not physically in front of me to be seen, his image is with me, an image created from all my experience of him – the way he looks, talks, acts, thinks, responds, all of this I have known in him, and all of it goes into my mental image of him, an image that is more vivid, more singular, more real than any idea or notion can be.

Real knowledge is not superior to notional knowledge. Most of what we know and rely on is notional knowledge. Notional knowledge lets us see patterns and similarities, make comparisons and recognize differences, bring ideas together and manipulate them so as to accomplish our goals. And yet for all its usefulness, notional knowledge does not usually move us to action. Knowing how the solar system works or Newton’s three laws of motion is a good thing, but it

will not, on most days, make much of a difference on how I live.

Real knowledge, on the other hand, does make that kind of difference. Knowing that my wife will die affects me as knowing that all people will die does not, for it makes me see her and feel for her and act towards her differently. She is real to me, and lives within me by her image in my mind, even when we are physically apart. My assent to the proposition that she will die, my belief that this is so, feels and is of a whole different order than my assent to the proposition that all men die.

Within this framework, what can we say about our knowledge of God and our belief in God? Obviously, we can have a notional knowledge of God, and most of what theology has to say about God is in the way of notional propositions. “God is creator of the universe. God is all-knowing. God loves what he has made.” These are propositions about a singular, unique being, but they really express ideas more than realities to the human mind. Real knowledge requires a vivid image, a construct in the imagination, and obviously we cannot get an image of God in our minds the same way we get most images in our minds. God is pure spirit, so he has no form to see, no voice to hear, no body to touch. More-

over, his infinite nature places him beyond our finite experience in every way. It would seem then, that our knowledge of God can only be notional. Newman admits that many people think like this, but although he gives this serious consideration, in the end he rejects it. The human being, he insists, can and does have a real knowledge of God and so is capable of making a real, religious assent to God. For there is in our imagination a clear, immediate image of God, one that comes to us not through our physical senses, but through our experience of conscience. Feelings of conscience, Newman



says, are what allow us to believe in God as if we saw him. They are the infrastructure of faith.

It is not easy to talk about conscience today. All of us have a great respect for conscience, and most of us have what Newman regarded as a mistaken idea of what it is. Especially in thinking about the Church, we tend to see church authority as opposed to the freedom of the individual, with conscience standing solidly as a bulwark of personal liberty. One must always follow one's conscience, and this is taken to mean that the only thing that church authority can do is present material to the conscience for judgment. Each must judge as best he can, and obedience to conscience requires me to set aside whatever doctrine does not commend itself to my reason and my judgment. Newman knew this mindset quite well, and he called it not "conscience" but "private judgment," and saw it as the very pith and substance of the "liberalism in religion" that he spent most of his life fighting against. Under any scheme of private judgment in religion, conscience tends to degrade into a mechanism by which we rationalize our pursuit of our own personal preferences, and truth becomes a purely private affair, my truth being different from your truth, with the difference acting as an insuperable barrier to any authentic human solidarity.

Newman rejects this view categorically. His view of conscience begins with the observation that the human mind is very adept at treating phenomena as if they were images that point to and sign forth another reality. When I read a book or view a building or contemplate a work of art, I experience these things as real in themselves and as a part of a world that is external to me. Yet there is more. I also, from them, gain an experience of the mind and personality of those who have made these things, and so they serve to awaken and form in me an image of their authors.

From this observation of how the mind quite naturally operates in its dealings with things outside itself, we now turn to the feelings of conscience that we all have. Unlike private judgment, which necessarily deals with doctrines and concepts at a fairly abstract level and

so is focused on notional knowledge, conscience and feelings of conscience are concerned with specific, singular circumstances that are a part of the concrete situation I find myself in, and they spring from the action that I actually took. Good feelings of conscience will follow upon an act that fulfilled the moral obligations demanded in this specific case, but it is the bad feelings of conscience that Newman thinks provide us with the vivid image of God that is the necessary condition for a real assent, a faith that is not confined to the realm of ideas but that gives us an immediate, real and personal sense of God, one that moves us to action.

Newman does not attempt to account for these bad feelings. He takes them as the "first principles" of his argument, and considers it enough to point to the undeniable truth that everyone (psychopaths excluded) has them. Bad feelings of conscience tell us in no uncertain terms that we have done wrong and are in the wrong, that we have offended against a judge and not merely transgressed some impersonal law or rule, that we are under the wrath of the supreme governor of the world because of what we have done, and that we stand in need of someone or something to effect a reconciliation and to revoke that judgment. The bad feelings of conscience give us all this, and thus they give us an image of the living God and a knowledge of him that is real and not merely notional. We believe in him, we know that he exists as if we had seen him with our eyes. How do we know God? We know him first and most vividly by the actions of our conscience precisely in those moments when it reproaches us for the evil that we have done.

This is not the whole of the story of faith, but it is the indispensable first phase. With this we can believe, really, in God and begin to hope for the Word he will speak to us, who will bring forgiveness of our trespasses, healing, peace and reconciliation. In the Scriptures, the story of our salvation begins with our creation and fall, and in the book of my own life, the story of God's love for me and my response begins with my offenses and the harsh, loving ministrations of my conscience. Conscience, then, is the founda-

tion for all that we are taught and learn of God.

—Fr. Bob Spratt, O.F.M.



### MEMORIAL VOTIVE LIGHTS

The action of prayer is often accompanied by the gesture of lighting a candle. The candle becomes an offering to the Lord, a sign of the offering of ourselves that we make to God whenever we come before him with a special intention or petition. After a while, we must leave the church to be about other business, but the candle stays, burning constantly in the church even as our prayer remains in the presence of the Lord.

Your gift to Saint Peter’s for the year-long memorial votive light helps to support all of our ministry and works. And on our part, you and your intentions are remembered daily in our prayers for our helpers and benefactors.

#### APPLICATION FOR YEAR-LONG MEMORIAL CANDLE

(Please print, leaving a space between each word.)

To be lit in honor of: \_\_\_\_\_  
Living \_\_\_\_\_ Deceased \_\_\_\_\_

Requested by: \_\_\_\_\_

Date candle is to be lit: Immediately \_\_\_\_\_ Specific Date \_\_\_\_\_

The offering for the Memorial Candle is \$150.00. Please enclose a check for the full amount with this form.



#### MEMBERSHIP IN THE FRIARS LEGION *brings with it...*

- A sharing in all of the more than 40 masses offered at Saint Peter’s each week
- A sharing in the daily Lauds and Vespers prayed by the Franciscans of Saint Peter’s Friary
- A sharing in the Eucharistic Novena of nine Tuesdays before the Feast of Saint Anthony of Padua on June 13
- A special Eucharist offered for the living members on the Feast of Saint Anthony on June 13 and on the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul on June 29
- A special Eucharist offered for the deceased members on All Souls Day on November 2 and on the Commemoration of All the Deceased of the Franciscan Order on November 5
- A sharing in all the ministry and good works done by the Franciscan Friars at Saint Peter’s, whom you support by your generosity



#### APPLICATION FOR PERPETUAL ENROLLMENT IN THE FRIARS LEGION

(Please print, leaving a space between each word.)

Please Enroll: \_\_\_\_\_  
as a Perpetual Member of the Saint Peter’s Friars Legion.  
Living \_\_\_\_\_ Deceased \_\_\_\_\_

Your Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City, State, Zip Code: \_\_\_\_\_

OFFERING: Individual, \$25.00 \_\_\_\_\_ Family, \$100.00 \_\_\_\_\_ (*Immediate family, parents and children*)